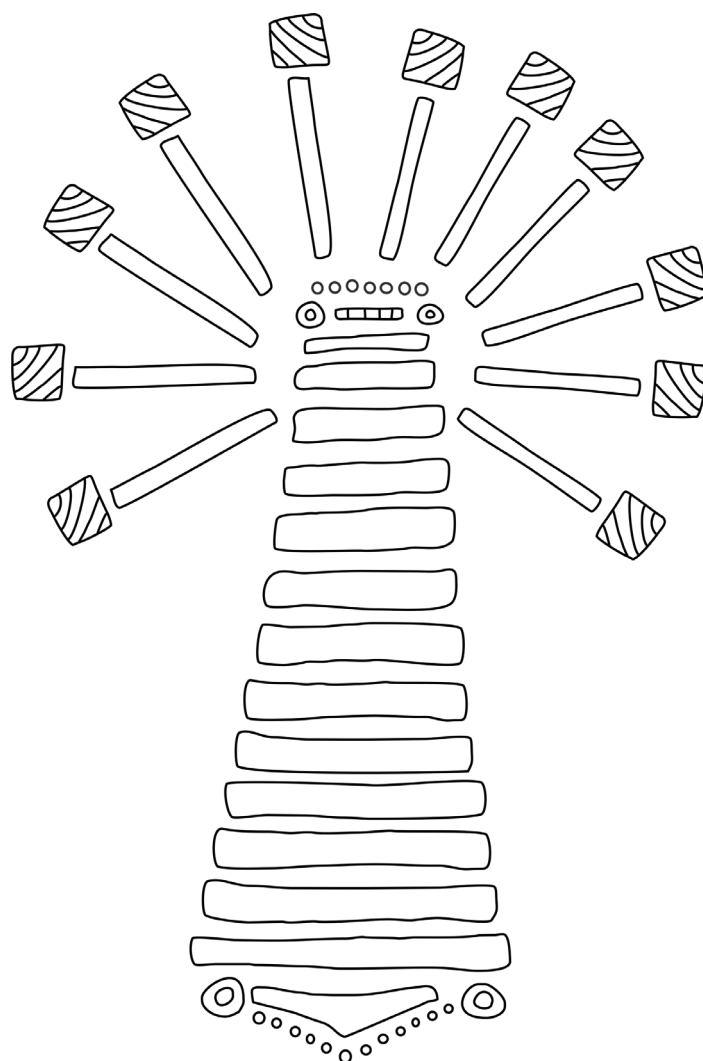


Maarika Autio

# TREE DIMENSIONAL TALES

Narrations on Musical Sustainability and Creativity  
via Mandinka Balafon's Viewpoint



Maarika Autio

## TREE DIMENSIONAL TALES

Narrations on Musical Sustainability and Creativity

via Mandinka Balafon's Viewpoint

ILLUSTRATIONS © MAARIKA AUTIO

Nordic Master of Global Music

Sibelius-Academy, University of Arts in Helsinki, Finland 2020

### Contents

1	PRELUDE . . . . .	1
1.1	Intro . . . . .	1
1.2	Research approach. . . . .	4
1.3	Theoretical angle . . . . .	7
1.4	About spelling and green liquid. . . . .	11
2	THEN . . . . .	13
2.1	Sosso-Bala: How I Began . . . . .	13
2.2	Structural facts: How to build a balafon . . . . .	16
2.3	When, where and why balafons were played . . . . .	18
3	TODAY . . . . .	22
3.1	Tuning conventions. . . . .	22
3.1a	Heptatonic . . . . .	22
3.1b	Diatonic . . . . .	26
3.1c	Chromatic . . . . .	28
3.2	Role in today's music . . . . .	29
4	TOMORROW . . . . .	32
4.1	Thoughts on musical sustainability facing globalization. . . . .	32
4.2	Regarding tonal limitations and creativity . . . . .	36
5	CODA. . . . .	41
6	SOURCES . . . . .	44

*I wish to express  
my deepest gratitude to  
all the jalis having shared their  
stories and knowledge with me,  
especially the dearly missed  
Alagi Mbye and Solo Cissokho,  
as well as Dr. Alexis Kallio for  
all the advice and help.*



## 1.1 Intro

"You feel it. I see that you do. You're never alone when playing the balafon," *Jali*<sup>1</sup> Alsegny "Mayeli" Camara whispered while washing my hands with greenish, strange smelling herbal fluid. With a hushed, secretive voice he explained how the spirits of the preceding generations were always there, infallibly present, silently nodding their heads in approval when we run our mallets across the keys. Approvingly, that is, if we do things the right way: we should never ignore their presence and always show them respect.

In the West-African Mandinka tradition, historically significant information, local beliefs, and mythical folk tales were preserved orally, passed down generation to generation. The duty of remembering and maintaining heritage was assigned to certain families called *jalilu*<sup>2</sup>. In the Mandinka<sup>3</sup> language, the word *jali* refers to members of these praise singer, instrumentalist, peace negotiator and oral historian families. While us dwellers of the western world rely on letters imprisoned between the covers of a book, the West-African *jalils* pass their knowledge on to next generations through songs, melodies and long, entertaining

---

1 *Jali* refers to a Mandinka hereditary social class. The title may be added before the name when talking to or about the person. In French texts *jali* is often translated as "griot", English texts sometimes use the word "bard". *Jali* can be seen spelled in multiple ways: *jeli*, *dialy*, *diely* etc.

2 *Jalilu* is a plural form of the word *jali*.

3 Mandinka language words in this inquiry originate from dialect used by in southern Senegal and Gambia. As there are many dialects in this group of languages, the written forms and pronunciations also notably vary.

stories told under the *bantaba*<sup>4</sup> discussion tree. Musical instruments, such as balafon and harp-lute kora, are used to frame the storytelling sessions in a pleasurable way, communicating what the words cannot and capturing crucial details into song lyrics.

My own balafon story begins in Dakar, where I was accepted as a Mandinka balafon apprentice in the late 1990's. I had the good fortune to cross paths with the aforementioned Mayeli Camara, a Guineen master *balafola*<sup>5</sup> curious and open-minded enough to see if this art could be adopted by such a total outsider: a person of the "wrong" sex (balafolas are traditionally men) and "wrong" geographical origin – Finland lies far from West-Africa. Mayeli's nephew was simultaneously going through the same initiative process. He was born into the role, and was thus not allowed to make the choice himself. While he had to learn the balafon, I came as an enthusiastic – although naive – volunteer. Our contrasting motivations taught me my first lesson about what it means to be born a jali, and the necessity of fulfilling one's social role.

In the morning, Mayeli would demonstrate us a *kumbengo*<sup>6</sup>, a traditional accompaniment sequence. Then he would go out to do whatever he had to, leaving us to practice. After a few hours he'd peek in through the porch window just to yell: "NO! It's not so." Then he would be gone again for hours, expecting us to figure things out ourselves. If the second time around he still wasn't satisfied with our efforts, only then would he, with a displeased look on his face, demonstrate the accompaniment again. Once you finally got it right, you were rewarded with an introduction of a secondary accompaniment, decorative variation or a melody line. He was a demanding teacher: all the nuances, microscopical details in timing, groove and umpf had to be *exactly* so before he'd accept my work and allow me to continue onwards.

Appetite grows with eating. The more I learned, the more my musical stomach growled. After the apprentice period was completed my hunger was still not

---

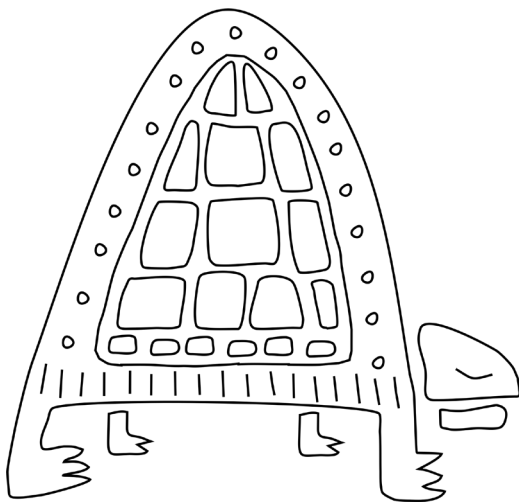
4 A centrally positioned, large tree, under which people gather for meetings.

5 Balafola in Mandinka refers to a professional balafon player.

6 Kumbengo means a balafon accompaniment loop in Mandinka.

satisfied. But it is not easy to maintain, much less improve your balafon skills in Finland. I played in dance formations, accompanied in afro dance classes, I gained experience wherever and whenever I could. Still, my balafon often spent weeks and months collecting dust at home. Until one day I received a phone call from the Global Music Centre's<sup>7</sup> director Jaana-Maria Jukkara: a Senegalese kora jali would be coming to Helsinki to give a solo performance. Jukkara was worried that he wouldn't be able to produce a complete concert alone, that the result would feel like it lacked something. Jaana-Maria had heard that kora and balafon were often played together, so she invited me to come and accompany him with balafon.

As it turned out, this kora jali did not lack anything, but performed with virtuosic skill and astonishing charisma. Ibrahima Solo Cissokho could easily have enraptured a much larger space and audience than what we had on that day. Luckily Solo loved experimenting. He welcomed me to come and perform with him, even though we had no time to practice, not even once. "What? A female balafola? In Finland? That I have to see!"



Although I had already learned the basic techniques with Mayeli, that improvised duo concert with Solo was a door-opener for me into truly understanding the art of the jali. In Dakar, Guinean born Mayeli had himself been a rootless foreigner. Solo's family, by contrast, was based in Senegal's Casamance, and there he invited me to come and learn more. Using the Cissokho Jalikunda<sup>8</sup> in Ziguinchor as my headquarters, I have now

spent seventeen winters learning, performing and touring in Senegal, Gambia, Mali and Scandinavia, seen what it is like to be born, grow up, work and travel as a jali musician, learned how the social roles differ between jali men and women, and finally begun to grasp what these instruments, songs and all the stories they deliver signify in local social context. This life experience is an important source of

<sup>7</sup> Musical institution in Helsinki, specialized in promoting world music in Finland.

<sup>8</sup> Kunda means family in Mandinka. Jalikunda = family of jalis.

information in this narrative inquiry. As the art of the jalilu is traditionally learned and shared orally, books, although they do tell so much, can't cover it all. You have to see it, smell it, live it, love it. And then you should share it in the form of a story.

It's been a long time now since I hit my first notes in balafon, and still I feel as though I'm taking my first fumbling steps in this seemingly endless world of melodic narration.

## 1.2 Research approach

In line with the Mandinka tradition of transmitting information and generating knowledge through storytelling, in this research I employ a narrative inquiry approach to explore the past and present of the balafon. Different kinds of *Mande*<sup>9</sup> balafons exist, but here I focus on the heptatonic Mandinka balafon of the jali families who today most typically reside in Guinea, Gambia, southern Senegal, Guinea Bissau and Sierra Leone. The research is divided into three parts, "Then", "Today" and "Tomorrow", to describe the balafon's journey from mythical history into the present, finally casting a few thoughts about its possible future as well.

Narrative inquiry, in this study, is an approach wherein "stories are used to describe human action."<sup>10</sup> During my travels in West-Africa I have heard multiple variations of some ancient jali stories, and in this setting narrative inquiry allows for certain insights into balafon's history and social significance. "The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are

---

9 The term Mande refers to a very large family of ethnic groups in West-Africa, including for example the Mandinka, Susu, Bambara, Yalunka, Jula etc.

10 Polkinghorne 1995, 5.

storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general notion translates into the view that education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories."<sup>11</sup> Storytelling organisms living storied lives... In my mind's eye I see a sunburnt, red-eared *toubab*<sup>12</sup> woman carrying her precious balafon through dusty Ziguinchor alleys.

Narrative inquiry uses stories as a source for qualitative research, aiming at describing concepts in a way that covers certain aspects more profoundly than factual notations in an unyielding statistic would. This is especially helpful in my theme, where ancient truths have multiplied into a happily diverse flora. Since this is not a research where one calculates percentages and confirms allegations with a comforting list of numbers, my goal is not to provide unambiguous answers, but to trigger interest and spark thoughts about the role of balafon and similar ethnic instruments in today's music. The narrative method used here is one of narrative analysis,<sup>13</sup> producing storied accounts from data collected from dozens of folk tale versions. In this sense, the story shared is like a tapestry, weaving together the different voices of those I have met as I travel on and write my own balafon story.

In each section of this thesis the narrator changes. In "Then" the narrator is the main character, the first ever built mythical balafon. The "Today" section hands the role over to one of the copies of the first balafon, now located in Finland in my possession. In "Tomorrow", when pondering about things to come, the narrator's voice will be my own. The purpose and aim of my using personalized storytelling as the structure is to pay respect to the jali traditions, provide the reader with information, and keep the stories breathing from yesterday to today and hopefully beyond.

This storytelling, and re-storying approach warrants some critical reflection on

---

<sup>11</sup> Connelly and Clandinin 1990, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Toubab is a word used in West and Central Africa to describe a white person. The term does not have derogatory connotations. In Wolof language the white tourists are sometimes wittily called the *jaaro-nop*, red ears, as that is where they forget to spread the sunscreen lotion.

<sup>13</sup> Polkinghorne 1995.



research ethics. From very early on I was made aware of the world of tales I was entering, and the fact that they go inseparably together with this instrument. Mandinka stories develop over time, as simply repeating them as such is not considered enough of an effort: you're supposed to keep the magic alive by adding a piece of your own soul into it.<sup>14</sup> A good storyteller jali is an entertainer who captivates the listeners' attention so that the essence of the message gets delivered. The stories are alive, constantly enriched with personal input from one generation to another, from one storyteller to another. Multiply this process by hundreds of years and you get an idea of how many variations of a single tale exist. The challenge arises from the fact that you're still supposed to keep your facts correct: it is not only about storytelling, but maintaining oral history as well. While colouring some details with your personal palette, you mustn't allow the original storyline be buried under suffocating decorative layers.

Jalis are born as jalis, therefore sharing, even sprucing up their ancestors' stories with creative add-ons weaves a seamless continuation to the tradition. A narrator now being a foreigner from afar may raise questions about ethics and an outsider's right to adopt the role of the main storyteller. My two major ethical cornerstones here are time and respect. I started to learn the balafon in the late 90's, was invited to stay with the Cissokho Jalikunda in the early 2000's, and since then I have been living and learning the jali mentality, growing with it, practicing my instrument skills and performing with the family. I have experienced the joy of spending years among these people, living through births and deaths of loved ones, with a colourful spectrum of incidents in between. But only now, am I writing anything down, having breathed my way through these words. Mastering the art of the balafon is a lifelong process for natives and non-natives alike, and I'm well aware that what I've learned is merely a fraction of the entirety. In this paper, I write about what I have been taught, what I have heard and what I have witnessed, filling in gaps with further research. Following cultural guidelines to the best of my knowledge, I respectfully and repeatedly emphasize that these writings are not the only, most accurate version of the truth: in keeping with tradition, they represent one tree among many in a forest of interpretations.

---

14 Mbye 2017-2018. Personal communication.

As you will soon read, balafon is a fantastic instrument with a breathtaking mythical history. Yet, on my Finnish home turf, the majority of people have never seen one before. On stage, I'm often confronted with raised eyebrows and gaping mouths, and have to answer questions like: "What are those balls under the keys? Bananas? Bread rolls? Eggs? Potatoes?" While laughing along with the audience, a voice inside reminds me once again that there are treasures in the world of musical traditions that people have yet to discover; that these treasures should be shared, not only to bring joy but to spread knowledge in a memorable way. There is the possibility, however tiny, that my focusing the narrative spotlight into balafon just might increase curiosity and appreciation towards similar, rarely encountered ethnic instruments. For there truly are diamonds to be discovered outside the top-ranking commercial playlists.

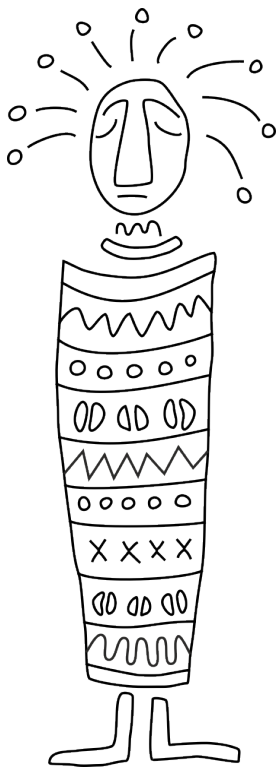
### 1.3 Theoretical angle

The aim of this thesis is to cast an inquisitive eye on the yesterday and today of the Mandinka balafon, and observe it attempting to stabilize its foothold and update its role in the current world music scene. Among the many, many stories that a Mandinka balafon might tell, for the purposes of this inquiry I would like to focus on the instrument's tradition through a lense constructed by new stimuli in world music practices and sustainability of musical cultures. With sustainability I refer to the ethnomusicological approach of the term, aptly verbalized by Jeff Todd Titon: "In applied ethnomusicology, sustainability does not directly reference green energy or developmental economics, although it may involve them. Rather, it refers to a music culture's capacity to maintain and develop its music now and in the foreseeable future."<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Titon 2019, 156.

Another key term I will touch on this inquiry is musical creativity, the spectrum of the concept broadened from composers' and technically skilled instrumentalists' standpoints towards ethnomusicological, sociological and intellectual perspectives of the term. Pamela Burnard has commendably researched musical creativities – note the author's use of plural form as she stresses the variety of practices the term is related to. Perhaps what most attracts my ear is her inclusion of traditions in her commentary on creative music making: "The ways in which musicians engage with local and global traditions of music-making involve new musical creativities that forge continuities with the past and a new vocabulary to go along with the expanding practices of the digital age."<sup>16</sup> In order to see if balafon's tonal specifications are harmful or beneficial for creativity when venturing outside the traditional repertoire, musical creativity will be observed in its relation to constraints. In "*Freedom and constraint in creativity*" Philip N. Johnson-Laird undertakes the task of demystifying and defining the ambiguous concept of creativity itself. In his wish to avoid "an amalgam of vagueness and incompleteness that takes too much for granted"<sup>17</sup> he attempts to solidify his



research computationally by designing a computer program to model possible creative options of a jazz bass improviser. While his research produces no definite answer to if creative processes are indeed computable, it implies a likely relation between creativity and constraints by concluding that innovative artistic choices are made from among options specified by certain criteria.<sup>18</sup>

will observe our changing times via the balafon's viewpoint, and musical conventions absorbing influences from the rapidly expanding world. By rapid expanding I refer to the tidal wave of changes initiated by the industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th century, and its continued ripple effects today: increasing traveling and tourism, internet becoming an indispensable part of people's everyday life, and how these

<sup>16</sup> Burnard 2012, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson-Laird 1988, 203.

<sup>18</sup> Johnson-Laird 1988, 218.

phenomena seem to be in a process of gradually diluting cultural borders. This startling global metamorphosis has not been left unnoticed by theorists. In fact, the entire branch of ethnomusicology blossomed out of a need to perceive and comprehend these world music confrontations.



n *"The Western Impact on World Music: Change, Adaptation and Survival"*<sup>19</sup>, Bruno Nettl interestingly describes the early ethnomusicological ideas around the turn of 19th – 20th century. When researchers began studying and documenting world music traditions, they divided the world into West and the rest. "The belief that there is a difference in essence between Western music and that of the rest of the world supported a broad view of humanity widely held in Europe and North America, a view that pitted the West and its ideals and values against the rest. This essential difference justified some of the ways in which Western society was treating the rest of the world."<sup>20</sup> In addition to this geographical demarcation, focusing on how Western influence was affecting the local traditions resulted in the world being divided further into concepts of before and after. While Western music was seen as a constantly shape shifting, developing, innovative form of art, music in other cultures was considered static, as it "did not come close to this fondness for new found principles and devices."<sup>21</sup>

While academic research obliges categorizing and giving names to all the freshly created subdivisions as a necessary tool for grasping and analyzing the bigger picture, it has its pitfalls. Nettl continues: "If the world of music was a group of relatively isolated musics, it followed that a non-Western music would be homogeneous, and thus a small sample would provide the essentials of the whole. This concept was applied to all, but particularly to tribal and folk repertoires. The musics of the world were divided into three or four categories, in accordance with the presumed complexity of both style and culture, under such rubrics as "primitive," "folk," "art," and popular music."<sup>22</sup> While my role here is not to judge, I feel compelled to voice that the ancient art of the jali being labeled as "primitive"

19 Nettl 1985.

20 Nettl 1985, 13.

21 Nettl 1985, 13.

22 Nettl 1985, 15.

strikes a tender chord. I have had the privilege of witnessing jalis devoting their entire lives to mastering and fine-tuning their technique, proudly acknowledging their current artistic level as a result of centuries of ambitious development. The definition for the word “primitive”, as stated for example in Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, “belonging to or characteristic of an early level of skill or development”<sup>23</sup>, couldn’t be further from the truth.

Then again, knowledge and understanding do deepen with time, and viewpoints get re-calibrated. Ethnomusicology is evolving. Its objective of protecting and promoting the vitality of threatened music cultures, present since establishing the discipline, has indicated the need for new working methods and principles. The fairly recently established sub-discipline of applied ethnomusicology “forms a context for research and practical initiatives aiming to support local communities to maintain a diversity of musics—particularly within indigenous and minority contexts, where musical heritage may have been imperilled by the huge socio-economic, political and technological shifts of recent decades.”<sup>24</sup> Alongside music, the cited ethnomusicologist Catherine Grant focuses on languages. Her approach supports my theme exceptionally well. Mandinka dialect spoken in southern Senegal and the Gambia does not actually have a specific word for playing an instrument, since all instruments talk, *fo*. Playing in a group equates to conversing with your fellow musicians, and indulging in a wild solo simply means that you have a lot to say. *Bala*<sup>25</sup> *fo*, bala talks: *balafon*.

And just like many rare languages have to battle for their survival, so too, do marginal music styles outside the global mainstreams. But how to safeguard the less spoken languages and music styles? Should they be punctiliously preserved, or should they be allowed to adapt – and thus inevitably change? If we decide that we should attempt to preserve them, at what point in their development do we name their ‘original’ form, dialect, style or melody? Ethnomusicology has faced this dilemma since very early on, and as previously mentioned, the researchers’ first approach was to label non-Western traditions as unchanging, static. This

---

<sup>23</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Grant 2012, 31.

<sup>25</sup> Bala or balo means wood in Mandinka. It is also the shorter name for the instrument.

view has undergone a notable alteration during last years: “Currently, in much of the ethnomusicological literature (and perhaps increasingly within the broader cultural heritage safeguarding schemes of UNESCO too), the implicit or explicit view is that it is not only possible for music genres to develop, evolve and change to reflect new contexts and adopt new influences: in so far as it affords them greater resilience and adaptability, it is also better for their vitality that they are allowed to do so.”<sup>26</sup> Grant points out that music tourism and festivalisation have their notable benefits as well, as they may strengthen a genre's vitality. The traditional music they present should therefore not automatically be regarded as less “authentic” and therefore of lesser value.<sup>27</sup>

Another positive development is that in recent ethnomusicological writings about the jali tradition I no longer seem to stumble upon the term “primitive”.

#### 1.4 About spelling and green liquid

Legends meandering far from their origin and being told in various languages produce an interesting variation in how the names are pronounced and spelled. Many of the West-African languages have yet to define their literary form. Local dialects are written down onomatopoeically, just as one hears them, with regional accents deliciously included. In schools, children are taught the spelling conventions not of their native tongue but official language, most often French or English, and therefore the very same names have vastly differing written forms in neighboring countries. Here I have chosen one way to spell the main characters’

---

<sup>26</sup> Grant 2012, 38.

<sup>27</sup> Grant 2012, 38.

names, but one should keep in mind that multiple variations do exist. Since related dialects under the vast umbrella of Mande languages are numerous,<sup>28</sup> the Mandinka words I am using and translating here originate from the dialect spoken in the Senegambian area, written and repeated as I have seen, learned and heard them used during years spent in that region.

Even when it comes to my instrument's name, the conventions vary. For starters, there are different types of balafons, so it is essential to stress that what I play, whose origins I have explored and what we're now zooming into, is the one called the Mandinka balafon, Mande balafon, *balafon manding*, *balafon mandengue* – and so forth. The written form varies, but what is being referred to is the heptatonic balafon most often played in Guinea, Sierra Leone, southern Senegal, Gambia and Guinea Bissau. It sounds very different than its pentatonic cousins in the not-quite-as-western West-Africa of Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Ivory Coast. Although their playing styles and melodies differ, all the balafons proudly trace their origins to the One I will soon pass the microphone to.

"There", said Mayeli. My hands were now sticky from the green liquid and smelled funny. "Your apprentice phase is thus successfully completed. I have taught you a respectable number of traditional accompaniments, to form a solid base that you will never have to be ashamed of anywhere you go. Tonight I've washed your hands with magic lotion. You must not wash them for three days. If you do this and keep your hands away from water, you will have courage to play the balafon for all kinds of audiences as long as you live. Will you do as I say?"

I did.

---

28 Charry 2000, 15-16.

## 2.1 Sosso-Bala: How I Began<sup>29</sup>

I am not of this world. There is another one, of which humans know very little, and that is where I came into existence. My memories of the transition into this world have faded, as all this happened more than eight centuries ago. And so I have to rely on stories passed on by the jalis, those annoyingly garrulous motor mouths, who cannot resist spicing up the original recipe with their personal flavors. Well, what can you do. Time adds branches and leaves to all stories.

In the early 13th century there still lived some individuals with a gift for being able to connect with the spirit world. Perhaps this rare ability to communicate with spirits led the whimsical *jinnis*<sup>30</sup> to present me to Soumaworo Kante<sup>31</sup>, king of the Susu in West-Africa. For deserve me he did not. Soumaworo was an evil, truly evil man. This sorcerer blacksmith king had covered his walls with human skins, nine severed heads of unlucky rivals decorated the royal resting chambers, and a monstrous snake guarded his war trophies, treasures and fetishes, of which I instantly became the most precious.

---

29 This version of the legend of Sosso-Bala is knitted together from several oral sources since late 1990's. The most influential narrators here are Jali Alagi Mbye (2017-18 in Gambia), Jali Mayeli Camara (1997-2002 in Senegal), Jali Solo Cissokho (2004-17 in Casamance) and Jali Lassana Diabate (2007 in Mali). Written sources include "*Mandinka Balafon*" by Lynne Jessup, UNESCO's "*List of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*", retrieved 2019, Paterno, Domenica R., 1994: "*The True Lion King of Africa: The Epic History of Sundiata, King of Old Mali*", and Encyclopædia Britannica, "*Sumanguru*" retrieved 2019. Footnotes have been added only if the statement has been heard/read from a single source, or to clarify a word, term or spelling.

30 Jinni, or *djinn* etc., word of Arabic origin means a spirit, an elfe, a supernatural being in various languages.

31 The name is written in multiple ways: Sumanguru, Soumaoro, Sumaoro, Sumaworo etc.





oumaworo manifested me with the help and guidance of my creator spirits, whom he had befriended when meditating in the heart of the blackest forest. As my name indicates, I am carved of wood, “bala”, and I can talk, “fo”. The spirits first led Soumaworo to the oldest *keno*<sup>32</sup> tree, the one with the most stories to tell. Of this tree he carefully carved my keys. With his blacksmith skills he roasted the wood in slow fire until it started to sing. And goodness gracious, how beautiful my voice was! Almost too beautiful to comprehend! So beautiful, in fact, that the clever Soumaworo pierced the calabash

gourds beneath my keys, and covered the holes with a spider’s egg sac, to give my voice a sizzling, scratchy flaw. As monstrous as Soumaworo was he understood aesthetics: he knew that “nothing perfectly flawless can be truly beautiful.”<sup>33</sup>

My voice was lovely, yes, but the stories I first sang were not. Soumaworo hit my keys in anger, drunken, with a heart that oozed poisonous hatred. He used my spiritual powers to bring misfortune to his opponents, and so, I regret to say, enabled by me, in 1203 Soumaworo Kante conquered Kumbi, the ancient capital of Ghana.<sup>34</sup> This marked the beginning of his reign, still remembered for its insane cruelty. I cannot precisely date my early years in the human world, as people didn’t count years then as they do now, but this approximate timing should be close enough for you to roughly calculate my age.

Soumaworo went on conquering the neighboring kingdoms, among them, Mali. Their young king Dankaran Touman, desperately trying to mediate peace, sent his older brother Sundiata Keita’s<sup>35</sup> jali, Niankoumang Doua<sup>36</sup> to Soumaworo as an ambassador. To sweeten the deal, Dankaran Touman added his own pretty sister Nana Triban in the gift package. But peace was not on Soumaworo’s to-do list. He gladly accepted the girl, but imprisoned the jali, forcing him to sing praise to him

<sup>32</sup> Mandinka word for African rosewood tree.

<sup>33</sup> Cissokho 2008-2017. Personal communication.

<sup>34</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica 2019.

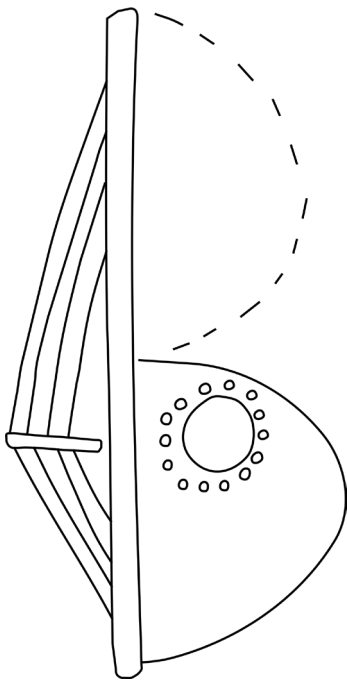
<sup>35</sup> Different spellings include Sunjata, Soundiata, Sounjata etc.

<sup>36</sup> The written form varies: Diakouma Doua, Nyangumang Duwa, Niankoumang Doua, Jankuma Doka etc.

instead of the useless, crippled wreck Sundiata.

One day, when Soumaworo was out again roaming in his beloved forest, Doua entered the royal chambers. He was shocked by what he saw, the severed heads, human skin tapestry, and the ugly snake slithering closer, poised to kill. Then he saw me. Being a musician, it was impossible for him to resist the temptation. Soumaworo had forbidden anyone to touch me or even breath in my direction, the penalty being death. But, mesmerized by my splendor, Niankoumang Doua forgot all about the snake and the rest and groped for the mallets.

And then... There are no words to describe it. Letters are clumsy, words too lame. Doua was a musician, born into a jali family, and in his hands I sang like never before. The spirit world unveiled itself, the severed heads blinked their eyes in awe, and even the snake shed cold lizard tears, moved by this unearthly beauty. Only the falcon, whom Soumaworo had appointed as my guardian spirit, shrieked that Doua should stop, or Soumaworo would come and kill him. Doua paid no attention to the feathered sentinel.



eing spiritually connected to his fetishes, far in the forest Soumaworo felt someone touching me. He took the shape of a whirlwind and stormed home, sword raised high, ready to decapitate the intruder. Caught in the act, Doua rapidly knitted together some clever lyrics, and began singing flattering praise to the mightiest of all rulers ever, the handsome and merciful Soumaworo Kante. The royal sword stopped in mid air: this serenade was too sweet to end. Instead of killing the musician, Soumaworo renamed him Bala Fo Seke, player and keeper of me, the first balafon. Bala Fo Seke would never return to Mali, but stayed here, as Soumaworo's head jali. To ensure that the jali would never walk away from me, the king swung his sword, not to cut Doua's throat but his achilles tendons.

Soon after this incident Soumaworo's luck changed. Why? I faintly remember homesick Bala Fo Seke playing songs with hidden meanings: songs sending

magical powers to Mali, to the place where Soundiata lived. This weakling teenager Soundiata, who'd been crippled all his life, suddenly sprang to his feet and mounted an army against Soumaworo. Soundiata Keita defeated Soumaworo in the battle of Kirina in 1235<sup>37</sup>. Even today, Soundiata is lovingly remembered as the lion king of the Empire of Mali.

And me? Would you like to know what happened to me? Well, I am still alive. Nowadays they call me Sosso-Bala. I live in the village of Niagassola in Guinea, not far from the border of Mali. I am guarded by the Dökala Kouyate family, the direct descendants of Bala Fo Seke. The oldest of the family is the *balatigui*, the only one allowed to play me. He unveils me for very special occasions only, as I am now more than 800 years old, and time has no mercy even for us spiritual objects. In 2008, UNESCO listed me among the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.<sup>38</sup> A myriad of duplicates have been carved of me, but although some of my unearthly powers may seep into their chiming, they remain nothing but diluted copies.

## 2.2 Structural facts: How to build a balafon

Sadly, during my long existence, I have had to witness the withering of mysticism, as people love to lean on inarguable facts more and more. They don't seem to be able to simply swallow things as such, but need to flush everything down with a wave of provable facts and definitions. Me, Sosso-Bala, and my duplicates used to be something like mythical truisms, cherished as indisputable members of

---

<sup>37</sup> Paterno 1994, 2.

<sup>38</sup> UNESCO 2019.

society, but now the veil of magic has been torn and all our secrets demystified into categories, statistics and paragraphs.

Balafon is my official object name. I am categorized by Western musicians among melodic percussion instruments and played with mallets. Typically a full-sized Mandinka balafon has 17-23 keys carved out of African rosewood tree, *Pterocarpus erinaceus*. The oldest, densest trunk produces the heaviest keys which, after having been roasted with slow fire, chime with the brightest, most impressive sound. As the human population continues to grow, forests are being cut down, and balafon manufacturers are forced to wander further and further to find the top quality trees. The picture worsens as worries are voiced about the increasing exploitation of African rosewood trees. "Until its exploitation as timber, African rosewood was used locally as firewood and charcoal for energy needs, the foliage as fodder for livestock, and the wood for construction of musical instruments such as xylophone..."<sup>39</sup> Now, rosewood is being exported overseas, far away from its home turf. No one can foresee the future, but what I can already tell for certain is that these poor trees are not cut down to build thousands of new balafons.

First you carve the keys, then heat them. This roasting of balafon keys is a delicate process – have you ever tried scorching a wooden block in fire without it catching alight? – and it may take days or more than a week before all the moisture has evaporated and the sound is sealed.<sup>40</sup> Then the keys are placed onto a bamboo frame and attached with strips of goat skin or nylon cord, the latter being the most frequently used option today. The lowest bass key is placed on one end, the highest treble on the other, and the rest are arranged one by one in between.

A balafola apprentice may choose to play me from either side, with bass keys to the left or right. If you have played piano or keyboard before, you probably prefer having the bass keys on your left hand side. This is understandable. I have heard, for example, of a certain female balafola from Finland, who sat opposite her master jali Mayeli as they comfortably jammed on the same instrument, one being a left-handed and the other right-handed. Having the bass keys on the left

---

<sup>39</sup> Dumenu and Bando 2016, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Mbye 2017; Jessup 1983, 34.

is nowadays the most common policy, but it still remains a personal choice: both left- and right-sided balafolas continue to exist.

Under each key you attach exactly the right size calabash resonator. The keys themselves will tell you which one belongs where: you take a gourd, run it under the keys while hitting them with a mallet, and listen. Under one of the keys the gourd starts to sing. This resonance is most audible if you have pierced two holes on the side of a gourd, and glued a spider's egg sack (or a piece of thin plastic bag) to cover them. The sizzling only happens when the key and calabash are a match.

Balafon mallets are two wooden sticks with a lump in the playing end. The lump is twisted from strips of natural rubber, *caoutchouc*, or *folewo*<sup>41</sup> as it is called in Mandinka. You ooze tears out of a cut in a rubber tree, and wait until the latex sap coagulates. At first, the new mallets are of fair color, but they gradually blacken when played. If you don't use your mallets, their color stays fair all right, but the rubber slowly dries, loses its elasticity, and the sound becomes wooden, soulless. Should your country of residence be too cold for rubber trees to grow, you can cut strips out of bicycle inner tire and tie your mallets with that, but while they may get close, they will never achieve quite the same sound and feel.

### 2.3 When, where and why balafons were played

Like all the jali instruments, balafons were brought out whenever there was a social gathering that needed our support. A wedding, for example, or a name giving party are good examples of such occasions, for after all it is us who make a

---

<sup>41</sup> Jessup 1983, 36 ; Jali Mory Sylla, 2017-2018. Personal communication.

party feel like a party. But, mind you: it's not all about fun. We have more serious obligations as well. In conflicts and wars our job is to encourage and bring strength to our troops. This we did then and this we still do. During, for example, the short Christmas War between Mali and Burkina Faso in 1985, the jali songs were broadcast constantly on the radio to encourage patriotism and support.<sup>42</sup>

Originating from the spirit world, we possess magical powers that may be used either for good or evil purposes. Among the good purposes we list winning those wars, of course, or helping to cure the sick. More recently, balafolas, even certain wide-eyed foreign versions, have been invited to play their empowering melodies in *ndëpu dof*<sup>43</sup> ceremonies, where music is used to drive madness out of a person. When the balafon would start a *lamba*<sup>44</sup> kumbengo, someone in the audience would feel the need to respond to its magical call, rise up and dance until entranced. Then he/she would fall and be carried away unconscious. When the patients woke up, the evil spirits that had caused them trouble had miraculously disappeared.<sup>45</sup>

When, where and why we were played also had to do with social status. In the ancient social hierarchy, the position of the jalis was interestingly versatile. On one hand, they sat next to the royals, delivering the king's messages to the commoners,<sup>46</sup> singing praises to the noble class consisting of farmers and warriors. To this end, balafons rang/chimed to enforce their high social ranking. The more listeners were present, the more generously the jalis were rewarded for their praises. It remains common practice today for jalis to be given money while they play, since only those with money are able to boast with it. The kora playing jalis conveniently have a hole in their instrument where you can go drop money. Balafola's gourds are too small for this purpose, but hey: the jalis have teeth! You can feed notes in their mouth (they will like that) or pile them on top of the balo,

---

42 Hoffman 2000, 10.

43 *Ndëpu dof*, a Wolof language term, is used in a ritual, *ndëp*, where people are treated for mental disorders, *dof*. I had the privilege to be invited to play in two *ndëpu dof* ceremonies in Dakar during winter 2007-2008.

44 *Lamba*, also called *lambango*, *jalidon*, *jelidon* etc. is a traditional jali accompaniment, kumbengo, known as the "Song of the Jali". "*lyé jalia le, Allah lee ka jalia da!*" The lyrics in this beloved *lamba* song translate approximately: God made us jalis who we are.

45 Kouyate 2007.

46 Cissokho 2004-2017. Personal communication.

or maybe just theatrically throw the notes all over them while they play – any of those methods will work, they'll sing flattering praise to you, thus enforcing your good luck and increasing your social appreciation.

Although they shared a close relationship with the royals, the jalis did not rank as high in the social hierarchy. No, they were classified among the *nyamakala*, hard working ordinary dwellers like the potters, smiths and leather-workers. Above the slave class, *jon*, but below freeborn nobles, *horon*.<sup>47</sup> They had to work hard to earn their living just like the rest of the *nyamakala*. Singing praises was a good way to coax tips, and so they would do this as often as they could. A jali would sing someone's name, and the person would have to dig deep into the purse to reward him, because if he didn't, there might be consequences. If annoyed by ungrateful stinginess, the jali could start singing bad luck charms instead, as the homesick Niankoumang Doua did when helping Sundiata defeat Soumaworo. You see, while the jalis were respected as the king's ambassadors, they were simultaneously suspiciously eyed as "false and fulsome flatterers"<sup>48</sup>, and feared for their hidden mystical powers. "The jeli-ke or griot, . . . he is despised but feared. More intelligent than most of the population, he exploits everyone"<sup>49</sup>.

Celebrations, rituals, and praise singing were three reasons to play me. The fourth was to help people remember. The role of the jalis as guardians of oral history and local traditions was a very important one. They would sing, play and tell stories. The older the person, the more stories he/she has had time to store, and when an aged jali dies, a huge amount of cultural information is lost – a tragedy comparable to a library burning down.<sup>50</sup> By now you know that my story is a long one, but this is not true of all the jali stories and songs. Often just a few words would be enough to serve as a reminder, attention-catcher or an allegory, if you didn't want to describe something like a circumcision in too much detail. Sometimes simply a name would do, perhaps the name of a person who should not be forgotten, or the name of a person the jali wished to milk money from.

---

47 Counsel 2004, 28-29 ; Conrad and Frank, Barbara E. 1995, 1-2 ; Hoffman 2000, 9-10. The words for Mandinka social classes, *horon*, *nyamakala* and *jon*, are seen written in multiple ways.

48 Hoffman 2000, 11, quoting Astley 1745, 279.

49 Hoffman 2000, 12. *Ke* means man in Mandinka. *Jalike*, *jelike* = jali man, *jalimuso* = jali woman.

50 An old West-African saying. Numerous oral sources, for instance Jali Solo Cissokho 2004-2017 and Jali Alagi Mbye 2017-2018.

And there we have it - we have come full circle. I have outlined to you my role and social status as it used to be. I, Sosso-Bala, have described you my basic structure so that should you want to, you could even build a copy of me and play. You would need the frame, keys, gourds, mallets... Oh no! Please forgive my eight century old mind that forgets things! There is one more detail that warrants remembering! Before attaching the calabashes and after the roasting, you still have to fine tune the keys. Balafon tuning is a complicated process with various options which I definitely should demystify for you. Unfortunately my mind is exhausted now. At this age I need to take a nap more often than not, so please let me pass the microphone onwards to one of my young duplicates.

Be well and chime.



## 3 T O D A Y

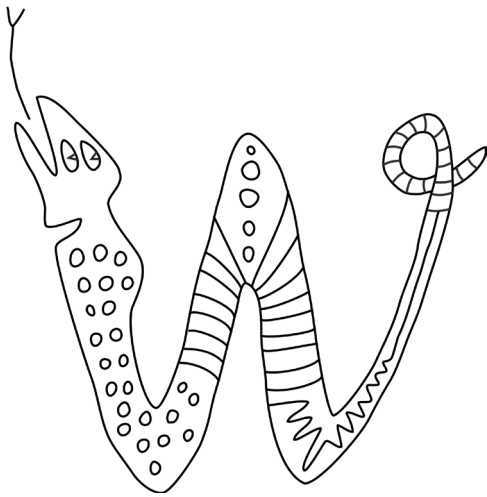
### 3.1 Tuning conventions

Balafon tuning conventions are no longer the same as they were just a few decades ago. I should know, as I have been dethroned, pushed into shadows from stage spotlights due to my sound becoming “too different” and “too troublesome to cooperate with”. Times changes fast and without mercy. Bear with me and I shall explain to you in more detail.

#### 3.1a Heptatonic

I am a beautifully constructed Mandinka balafon with twenty top quality keys, fabricated in Guinea roughly during the early 1990's. I now reside in a cold country called Finland, where I was hauled by my new owner, a female Finnish balafola. What were the odds for that happening? But anyway, here I am. My tuning follows the traditional convention called equidistant heptatonic, or more compactly, equiheptatonic. In theory the term means that eight notes build an octave, each note being equally distanced from its neighbor. I say in theory, because in the old times West-African instrument builders did not possess Western tuning forks or electronic devices to measure the tiniest tonal differences with digital numbers, as they nowadays do. They used their ears, aesthetic sense and generations of tradition to tune us balafons. If we describe equiheptatonic tuning with an absolute numerical system, dividing the musical octave into 1200 cents (one half tone equals to 100 cents, multiplied by 12 to build the chromatic 12-step

scale of our days), then, as calculated by Lynne Jessup in 1983,<sup>51</sup> each interval in equidistant heptatonic tuning is 171.4 cents. A human is not a machine, so unyielding modern tuning meters do reveal tonal inaccuracies in traditional balafons' heptatonic scales. Still, not as much as one might expect: a well trained human ear can achieve an astonishing level of accuracy. According to Jessup, "Mandinka instrument builders hear the equidistant spacing without the aid of mechanical tuning devices or mathematical calculations. Yet, considering the mathematical basis of this tuning, it is amazing to find it used with such accuracy. Not only are the intervals correct to a degree within the pitch discrimination of most people, but also the pitch chosen as the primary note is usually the same (absolute pitch)."<sup>52</sup>



While I completely agree with Jessup about the amazing accuracy, I would add that "usually the same pitch" applies mainly to instruments built in nearby regions, because, like spoken language, tunings change with time and as a result of changing geographic location. As our name implies, us balafons are expected to talk, "fo", so with time we have developed differing dialects that have diverged into separate musical

languages. The most obvious examples of this are the pentatonic balafons. East from Sosso-Bala, around Mali, the Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and Ghana (which is not actually east, but still) and thereabouts, balafon keys are carved to follow a pentatonic tuning, with only with five notes forming an octave. This tuning makes them better able to follow and vocalize the tonal spoken languages of those areas. Their lingo has become so sophisticated, that even grammatical rules have been detected and defined. For example in the "*Talking Balafons*" -publication, Hugo Zemp and Sikaman Soro verbalize Senufo balafon melodies of Ivory Coast into Senar language words.<sup>53</sup> As a result of anthropological linguistic studies, Laura McPherson has ventured as far as publishing grammatical principles for the talking

<sup>51</sup> Jessup 1983, 20.

<sup>52</sup> Jessup 1983, 20.

<sup>53</sup> Zemp and Soro 2010, 7, 9, 11. Senufo people live in a region spanning from Mali to Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso. Senar is one of the languages spoken by the Senufo ethnolinguistic group.

pentatonic balafons of the Sambla people of Burkina Faso.<sup>54</sup> I find my pentatonic cousins' achievements incredibly fascinating, although I cannot understand the foreign language they speak, being a Mandinka balafon myself.

Fortunately all of us balafons, heptatonic as well as pentatonic have our common ancestor still existing in this world. Comparing ourselves to the First One, we can hear how far we have meandered. As Sosso-Bala himself described in the previous chapter, when crossing the border from the spirit world into ours, he laid out the foundational conventions. In the beginning, all his duplicates were tuned accordingly, with heptatonic tuning. But while us Mandinka balafons of Guinea, southern Senegal, Guinea-Bissau and Gambia still continue to use a heptatonic tuning, the standards seem to be venturing further away from the original, especially with the strengthening of Western melodic influence.

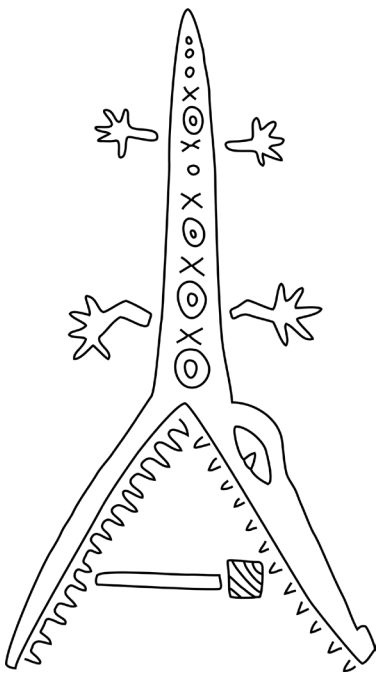
Good quality recordings of Sosso-Bala soloing are hard to come by. The few samples my human companion has been able to locate suggest that my tuning is close to the first one. Not exactly the same, for certain tonal differences can be heard, but recognizably close: our musical language and melodic expression bear respectable resemblance. My tuning used to be commonly used. I was handed over as a symbolic gift when my owner had successfully completed her balafon apprenticeship. This took place in Dakar, Senegal, in the late 90's. Then it was not uncommon to hear other balafons chime like me.

Should you wish to imagine what an equidistant heptatonic tuning sounds like, you can start by comparing it to the Western diatonic scales. Think of the white keys of a piano. The tonal starting point of an octave is close, but not quite the same as the standard A440 tuning, so try to focus on tonal distances between notes and not so much on their kilohertz values. With this strategy you will hear a close approximation. In piano, most whole notes have a semitone between them, except between the 3rd-4th and 7th-8th white keys. If we keep disregarding the black keys, this results into a diatonic heptatonic tuning, not equidistant like mine. If you were able to imagine the piano tuning just now, you'd also be able to hear which notes of mine are more "off" than others, as they pretty much mark the

---

54 McPherson 2019, 255-294.

places where the semitones are missing. Equidistant tuning means that you can conveniently transpose a song to start in any key, according to your lead singer's vocal preferences. Singers greatly appreciate this. When it comes to colours and moods of music, dwellers of the Western world generally consider songs in major keys to be "happy", while songs following minor key chords are regarded as "sad". As logic would imply, an equiheptatonic tuning lies cleverly in between. If a melody that we're used to hearing in major diatonic keys is played with a balafon like me, it sounds oddly melancholic. And vice versa. But once you get used to it, an equidistant heptatonic tuning may start to make sense, or even begin to sound beautiful in your ears. While you may get close, at best you'll always be labeled more or less "out of tune" when playing diatonic or, even worse, chromatic music in a band with more modern instruments.



nd that is why I have been forced into an early retirement. Recently, my owner did have the chance to co-operate with a wonderful kora jali by the name of Solo Cissokho, also a lover of traditional sounds, who was happy to tune his kora according to my keys. We made wonderful concert tours across Senegal, appreciating and loving our authentic tonality. But the pressure to change gradually intensified as members of our band kept insisting that we should tune according to them and not them to us. Finally my owner gave up and shifted over to playing diatonic balafons when in a group. Apparently she was not the only one to make this leap. In the late 90's one could still purchase

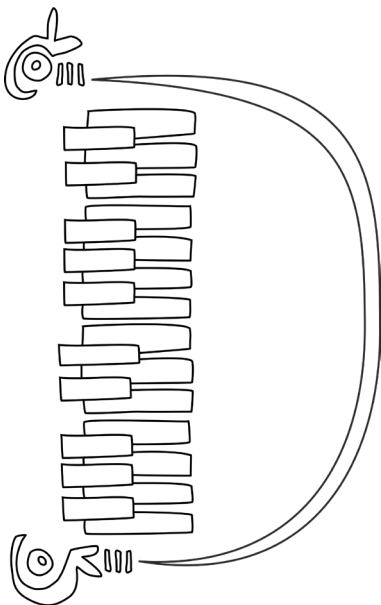
equidistant balafons in Senegambian area, but nowadays my owner seems to stumble only upon the diatonic versions. This is not to say that equidistant heptatonics don't exist anymore, for they do, but less and less so. Steadily gaining stronger foothold even in traditional African music, the A440 chromatic tuning is globally molding audiences' expectations of what instruments should sound like.

"Now listen, Maarika. This balafon you must not sell, nor ever change its tuning!" Solo's voice was stern, and he was shaking his finger towards me. "This is an

old *Yalunke*<sup>55</sup> balafon, very carefully and accurately tuned, extremely precious. Reflection of times gone by. You just wait, and one day you shall understand its full value.”<sup>56</sup>

Sadly, Solo Cissokho has already left this world, but I’m still here, tuning intact, collecting dust, waiting for the day of my returning into the spotlight.

### 3.1b Diatonic



diatonic tuning is sometimes called heptatonic, because it also has seven notes. But since they are not the same, for clarity’s sake it is better I continue to use the term diatonic. In Western music theory, the diatonic scale is defined as a heptatonic scale with five whole notes and two semitones in each octave, the two semitones being separated by two or three whole notes. When verbalized like this, the tuning may seem complicated, but as the standard is so common nowadays, all musicians instantly know what it sounds like.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, although the chosen primary note for Mandinka instruments was regionally about the same, and respectable accuracy was achieved without tuning devices, they were traditionally tuned either as solo instruments<sup>57</sup> or to be played in sets. Us balafons you would tune in pairs, one for the soloist and the other for accompaniments, to ensure that both instruments match each other flawlessly. To some extent, this way of thinking can still be recognized: balafon’s tuning may be specifically adapted to match the other instruments of a setup. In traditional music scenes balafons are often played

55 Yalunke (written form varies) is an ethnic group living in parts of Guinea, Sierra Leone, Mali Senegal. The language belongs to Mande languages and is closely related to Susu.

56 Cissokho 2004-2017. Personal communication.

57 Jessup 1983, 20.

together with kora-harps, who in turn can choose different notes as their base notes, depending on the player's preferences. Listening to koras both live and in recordings, the most often used base note today seems to be F. Diatonic koras tuned in F *silaba*<sup>58</sup> have a B flat in their scales. If you are a balafonist performing with an F-based kora player, you'll have best success tuning your instrument in F major. Not all kora players choose to play in F though. The aforementioned Solo Cissokho thought his kora sounded best when based in G. My owner thus has a diatonic balafon tuned to G, with an F sharp included. Since there are few G-based korists, that brother of mine also tends to collect dust, dreaming of better days to come. F and G-based balafons, although closely related, do not correspond well with each other. To best avoid these kinds of tuning collisions with koras and other instruments as well, most diatonic balafons today are tuned to C major. It is a comfortable tuning for keyboard players, and other instruments usually have no problem with it either. In an F-based kora, the C major tuning with a B instead of B flat is called *sauta*, and it is the second most commonly used kora tuning after *silaba*. So while most kora songs would still go in F *silaba*, you'd only have one note to avoid if playing a C based diatonic balafon. Although not optimal, this feels manageable.

While exact and correct in certain songs, diatonic tuning is quite unforgiving in music that doesn't follow the same base key. Equidistant heptatonic tuning, on the other hand, is always off roughly the same amount. So, if your base note is close enough to the A440 pitch standard like mine is, an equidistant tuning may, at times, prove easier to deal with. You may never chime exactly in pitch in equidistant tuning but you will get manageably close, something diatonic tuning cannot offer. Thankfully, traditional Mandinka music melodies follow the ancient ground rules set by heptatonic scales, so most songs still sound "right" in diatonic scale, sparking sentiments of recognition in the tradition loving audiences. But should you play with more modern instruments like guitar, bass and keyboard, and have to deal with chromatic chord changes, or should you venture as far as experimenting with less traditional music styles, you may begin to feel that the diatonic tuning is not versatile enough for you. If the song goes in different key

---

<sup>58</sup> *Silaba* is one of the traditional tunings of kora, the most commonly used. In diatonic scales it is the same as major tuning, F *silaba* being thus equal to F major.

than where your balafon is tuned, you may manage by avoiding certain notes, but find that this tactic limits your artistic expression at times. To tackle this problem, some musicians have developed revolutionary solutions.

### 3.1c Chromatic

Since the 13th century the balafon's structure has remained very much the same as my ancestor , Sosso-Bala. While the tuning may have developed regional dialects, the basic structure of the instrument has not changed. The keys are carved from the same rosewood and are similarly processed, carefully chosen calabash gourds still sizzle underneath, and caoutchouc, natural rubber, continues to be the best wrapping material for balafon mallets.

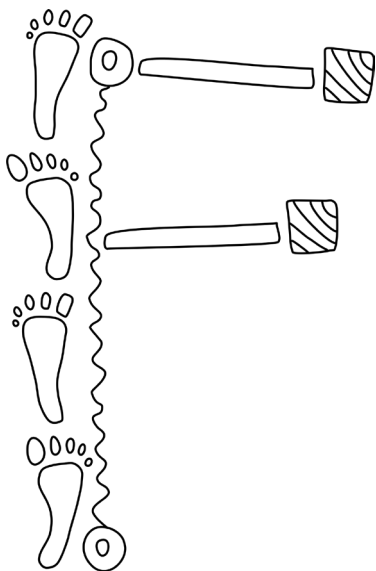
So it has been – until now. To avoid artistic limitations due to the aforementioned tuning collisions, some balafon players have ended up placing a second balafon partly on top of the first one, tuning the semitones on that one, to mimic the black and white keys of a piano. The two balafons are placed on separate stands (keyboard stands serve this purpose quite well) and the result is an instrument that resembles a concert marimba.

By combining two balafons like this, you have created a new type of instrument altogether. The chromatic scale opens new doorways for the repertoire, making it possible to advance from traditional styles towards more modern music, jazz, and so forth. It forces you to adjust your playing technique, as you now deal with two layers of keys instead of one. The instrument gets closer to marimba in structure, but the shorter, more stocky balafon mallets are not as well optimized for double layer playing as longer, thinner and lighter marimba mallets. A few balafon players have even been known to detach the plastic resonating membranes from the gourds, as their sound has been found too “scratchy and disturbing” in amplified band setups. This shifts the instrument's characteristics and personality even more towards a marimba.

Time will tell if these chromatic balafons remain singular experiments or if they point toward the general direction the instrument development is taking.

### 3.2 Role in today's music

Earlier, in chapter "Then", you have had the chance to read my ancestor's narration about where and why balafons were played in the past. Although much of this information still applies today, life is a constant flow of changes, and groundbreaking new elements have been added to our story. The balafon's role today depends on what kind of music is on the set list, who is listening and where.



First let me zoom in on Africa, our continent of origin. Generally in West-African countries the traditional music styles are still very much alive and vibrant. Why is this? I am merely a balafon and cannot say for sure, but my guess is that this has a lot to do with the local social infrastructures. The mixture of cultures and languages in coastal West-Africa is mind-blowing. In Senegal alone, various sources estimate that there are between 25-39 established dialects, with about a dozen of these having been given the status of national language<sup>59</sup>. New "national" languages are added to this

list as soon as their literary forms have been established. In practice this means that the local population is a colourful mixture of vastly differing ethnic groups

<sup>59</sup> Numerous sources, for example Encyclopædia Britannica 2020 ; Simpson 2008, 83.



living in close daily contact with each other. This may well be one of the reasons why music has become such an important and beloved social connector. People feel pride about their roots and cultures, and wish to maintain their ethnic identity amongst all the bubbling diversity. Traditional music styles of all these ethnic groups, their specific rhythms, songs and dances performed in local events strengthen people's feelings of belonging and togetherness, and spark sentiments of joy over who one was born to be.

Therefore, in those West-African countries where Mandinka balafon is part of the local tradition, it is still being used much like before. The tuning may have shifted more and more from equiheptatonic toward diatonic, but this hasn't changed the instrument's role in music, as long as the style is traditional or notably inspired by it. The balafon has an immediately recognizable characteristic sound and colour, so it continues to be one of the valued musical elements supporting social connectivity and helping to win over the hearts of audiences who appreciate tradition. This applies all the way up to the level where national identities are defined. Even in the very title of Senegal's national anthem: "*Pincez Tous vos Koras, Frappez les Balafons*" – "Pinch your koras, strike the balafons", you can hear us balafons chime!<sup>60</sup>

The situation changes with geographical distance. With all the increasing traveling and tourism, there are now supporters of traditional African music beyond the continent as well, but the less the audience has grown accustomed to the balafon's distinctive sound, the less it misses it. This is logical and to be expected. Especially with non-traditional music styles, which do not follow Mandinka melodic guidelines, the diatonic balafon may be regarded as an options limiting factor. While chromatic balafons might be able to chime their way through these kind of obstacles, there is still the unique sound of the instrument to contend with. While the characteristic, bright, snappy sizzle is useful for creating certain colors and feel in music, at other times it may be perceived as too much, too foreign, too strong an element, and therefore unwanted. As a result some balafolas have decided to abandon this feature. But if you ditch the sizzle, and shift from diatonic repertoire into the wide world of chromatics, will you risk losing an indispensable

---

60 Senegal's national anthem since 1960. Lyrics by Leopold Sedar Senghor, translation mine.

part of balafon's special identity as well? Musical globalization – we will talk more about this very soon – which unifies our subconscious expectations of what music should sound like does not help either. Or, could this development still prove beneficial, observed from a different angle? This is an interesting topic that shall be addressed in the next chapter. My human companion is already anxiously waiting for her turn to speak.

It seems the further we drift from our roots in musical style and in our original geographic birthplace, the more the balafon's role diminishes from that of a central and key element to that of an interesting add-on, a musical spice, or a rarely used sound effect. I'm quietly wondering if us balafons should change our name for non-West-African audiences, and start calling ourselves *baladumbu* (bala-whisper), or even *baladewo* (bala-silence)? That's grimly put, I admit, but I still wish we were given more possibilities to talk.

Thank you.

## 4 TOMORROW

### 4.1 Thoughts on musical sustainability facing globalization

Globalization. The rearrangement of the world's economic, cultural and sociological circulatory systems. "Globalization is the expansion of commercial networks, the blurring of cultural and national boundaries, and the compression of space and time."<sup>61</sup> Heard until clichéd, still unavoidably so: the world is rapidly changing. As previously described in the "Theoretical angle" chapter, the global reformation initially triggered by industrial revolution has led to a sky high increase of tourism. Traveling on this massive scale didn't exist a few decades ago. While a valid passport enables us to purchase an online flight ticket and travel wherever we wish, globetrotting is nowadays possible even without leaving home, as the internet has practically erased the concept of geographic borders. The sounds and colours of world events pulsate daily on our smartphone screens.

This has a remarkable impact on music consumption. The musical buffet table now accessible for all contains delicacies from all over the world. Online digital streaming services have introduced a completely new, affordable route for artists to publish their work and engage listeners from far away countries. Innumerable music charts offer a myriad of options to choose from, so variation has increased – at least in theory. The question remains if this border-diluting global development will eventually lead to an increase or decrease in diversity. The topic is anything but simple, and different approaches yield different answers.

---

<sup>61</sup> White etc. 2011, 4.

To facilitate understanding the issue in all its complexity, some researchers encourage us to visualize the world of music as an ecosystem, where certain elements can be positively influenced, and others much less so.<sup>62</sup> We see examples of this in nature conservation: when striving to protect endangered species, we simply cannot control all the elements that impact the species. The same can be said in a musical environment: on one hand globalization may pose a threat to diversity, while elsewhere it introduces notable genre vitalizing elements that support survival. Attempting to understand these kind of interrelations helps define strategies for supporting musical sustainability.

If we juxtapose music with spoken dialects, as has been one of the strategies in this inquiry, we may observe that mutual exchange of information and ideas requires some kind of common tonal language. Perhaps globalization has already created a version of such a dialect, a musical *lingua franca*. Common tuning, general consensus on pitch, time signatures and rhythm patterns adapted by all, core instruments of a “typical” setup... One Tuning to rule us all, One Sound to find us, One Style to bring us all and in the music bind us.<sup>63</sup>

Should the lens be narrowed to exquisitely precise tuning, musical globalization may indeed have a negative effect on diversity. Listeners will get used to universal conventions, and instruments who do not follow the rules may begin to irritate the consensus-accustomed ears. The more accurately one hears tonal differences, the more so. This I can say from my own experience: having been exposed to Western standard A440 tuning since childhood and having witnessed my pianist father insisting that our grand piano always be in perfect pitch, it took me a good while to get accustomed to, (and even longer to appreciate), the balafon’s equidistant heptatonic tuning. Today I miss its melodic tint in music but I have not yet forgotten how it burnt my eardrums at first. Since diatonic tuning is close enough to Mandinka balafon’s equidistant heptatonic that traditional repertoire can be performed with it, it is understandable that jalis and instrument fabricators have opted to save the global audiences’ ears from the strain and new balafons are tuned diatonic, while equiheptatonic ones soon risk extinction.

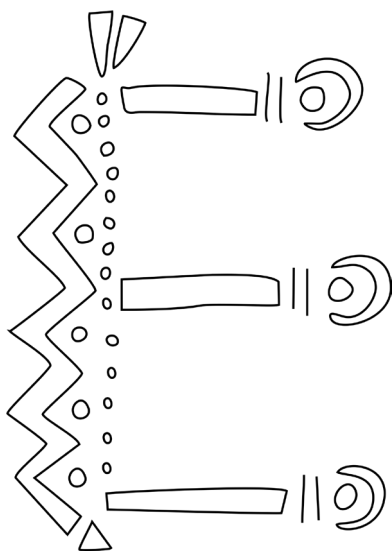
---

<sup>62</sup> Schippers and Grant 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Modified version of a poem in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* -trilogy: “One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all, and in the darkness bind them.”

Still, diversity of tunings is but a minor detail in the entire concept of musical sustainability. Globalization-induced musical tourism and festivalisation have shuffled the pack so thoroughly that classical ethnomusicology has been forced to grow a new branch entirely (applied ethnomusicology) to study the impacts of this development.<sup>64</sup> What I've witnessed through my own experience runs parallel with the earlier cited observations of Catherine Grant, who noted that in terms of sustainability, the phenomenon has its benefits. People today have the possibility to hear and learn traditional music even in distant countries. Immigrant artists are giving regular classes and workshops, spreading interest and information about their cultures. Mandinka dances and djembe drumming have become quite popular leisure time activities in many countries, and as a fairly new add-on, also kora workshops have begun to gradually gain ground. One can participate in themed holiday workshops, travel to the roots continent, learn and witness how the tradition is still alive in its original location and begin to comprehend its social role and significance. All of this increases knowledge and appreciation for these traditional arts and leads to the growth of enthusiastic, informed and at times quite demanding audiences, who demand the sustainability of the entire genre.

Indeed, the vast field of world music in all its richness of sounds and styles has gained popularity. While I was not able to find reliable statistics about audience sizes, medias clearly indicate that world music themed festivals and events are constantly growing in number and size, larger ones already mass events with



thousands of international spectators. While enjoying the mass attractions, people also seem to have a thirst for individual variation, with fans of different genres choosing to attend whichever subgenre event pleases them the most. The increase in world music popularity in past decades gives no reason to assume that the trend wouldn't continue in the years to come as well.

arly ethnomusicological ideologies about preserving tradition exactly as such have become outdated,<sup>65</sup>

64 Grant 2012, 31.

65 Nettl 1985 and Grant 2012.

and freedom of creativity is allowed to stretch to cover the area of traditional music as well.<sup>66</sup> In an article about traditional musical instruments and modernization, Max Baumann underlines the artistic freedom of even the traditional musicians. "It is the musicians who today select, newly configure, historicize, sample, innovate and synthesize from the offerings available, following their individually conceived or organized concepts of tradition."<sup>67</sup>

To jalis this is nothing new, as they have always considered personal input an important tradition maintaining factor. Tuning, instrumentation, arrangements etc. may all change and songs may not sound the same as they did centuries ago, but this has opened up new perspectives as well. Some enthusiasts, including myself, now find joy in comparing published versions of certain ancient jali songs, traveling around the world listening to interpretations in multiple styles that are enriched with influences from various folk music genres, jazz and all kinds of creative experimenting. Contrasting approaches spark curiosity about where a theme originated from, and one tries to track down its earliest version available in order to be better able to visualize the meandering paths it has taken. In other words, while globalization is distancing musical themes from their origin, it may simultaneously loop some listeners back to the very roots level, creating interest towards the older versions and thus supporting the sustainability of the less consumed traditional subgenres. This and other similar observations about different influences on musical sustainability are in line with the research defining globalization as somewhat of a two-sided sword, having both positive and negative effects depending on the sub-genre and angle under observation.<sup>68</sup>

Even with today's growth of world music audiences in general, there remain those marginal genres under the large umbrella that do not seem to enjoy similar increase in popularity. The Mandinka balafon, for example, has not gained an equally firm foothold in Western music scenes as other members of the same ethnic family like the ubiquitous djembe drum, or kora, which is also a diatonic instrument. Perhaps the inflexibility of tuning poses too great a challenge – unlike

---

<sup>66</sup> Burnard 2012, 8.

<sup>67</sup> Baumann 2000, 125-126.

<sup>68</sup> Schippers and Grant 2016, 3.

balafons, koras can be quickly tuned to match different diatonic scales – or maybe it's the raspy sizzle of the gourds, I cannot say for sure. Nor can I foresee if the chromatic two-layer experiments will notably increase balafon's usage in the future. But even if the numbers are small, interested listeners curious about Mandinka balafon do exist. In commercial popularity graphs, evidence of support for balafon music and that of similar genres may represent a mere tiny speck, but nevertheless, the evidence exists. The question of musical sustainability in the grips of globalization remains a complex one, but the general increase in interest towards world music offers at least flickering green light for the future prospects of balafon and other marginal sub-genres.

While tonal inelasticity may bar some opportunities for Mandinka balafon, overall growth in popularity of West-African traditional music may just tip the scale toward a positive outcome for this unique instrument. Only time will tell if this is a realistic or optimistic point of view. Hopefully, there will always be those who appreciate the rusty sizzle of the balafon's calabashes.

#### 4.2 Regarding tonal limitations and creativity

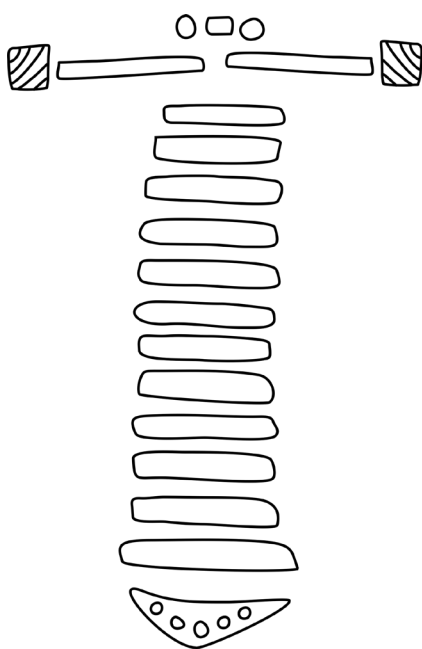
The multidimensional concept of creativity having thus been extended all the way onto the field of traditional music making,<sup>69</sup> there still remains the issue of the innovative playground changing when dealing with instrument specific constraints. World music today is like a sponge absorbing influences from all directions, and vice versa: world music hues are a welcome, vibrant addition in all kinds of events, happenings and musical projects well outside the ethnic instruments' traditional usage. While this experimenting may lead to refreshing discoveries, it also requires certain flexibility from music makers, if all of the instruments don't

---

69 Baumann 2000, 125-126 and Burnard 2012, 8.

follow the same tonal structure. In a chromatic setup, the initial reaction is to perceive balafon's tonal exclusions as limitations to creative work. As previously explained in the section about tuning conventions, the most typical tuning for Mandinka balafon nowadays is diatonic, which obviously offers less possibilities for modulation than chromatic. Still, having played both kora and balafon in setups ranging from theatre to various musical experiments, surprisingly often, I have had to demonstrate to songwriters and fellow musicians what this means in practice. Western educated musicians tend to be so profoundly tied to chromatic thinking that they are not prepared to stumble upon instruments that cannot follow all the chord changes in the composition. Tuning is not a hindrance when balafon and kora play their traditional music or music based on it, since they are designed to support traditional heptatonic framework of Mandinka songs. The friction starts when attempting to follow key changes in other types of songs.

Tonal exclusions may lay their game rules, but they don't have to limit creativity. Balafon's very definition of being a talking instrument once again supports the linguistic approach strategy, so its keys can be pictured as a tonal vocabulary. In 1960, Theodor Geisel, using the pen name Dr. Seuss, was challenged by his publisher Bennett Cerf to write a children's' book using only a selection of 50



words.<sup>70</sup> The result was an astonishing bestseller with sales numbers rocketing sky high. In *"Green Eggs And Ham"* the character called Sam-I-Am tries to persuade another character to taste green eggs and ham, but he keeps refusing, until in the very end he gives them a go.<sup>71</sup> Despite the vocabulary being radically limited, the story is attractive, cleverly rhymed and so startlingly inventive, that it is not wonder its popularity flourishes today.

he book's unique concept led to the birth of a green eggs and ham hypothesis<sup>72</sup>, which focuses

<sup>70</sup> Pease 2010, 121.

<sup>71</sup> Dr. Seuss / Geisel 1960.

<sup>72</sup> Haught-Tromp 2017.



on the impact of restrictions into creativity. Study results presented by Catrinel Haught-Tromp point to the conclusion that constraints, or even mere practice with them, can indeed stimulate creativity.<sup>73</sup> When attempting to solve problems in the quickest, least laborious manner possible, the brain first opts for previously established pathways, which are more likely to yield clichés. But when these are excluded, the mind is forced to come up with new innovations. On the other hand, the creative dead-end, blank canvas paralysis caused by too much space with nothing to cling to, can block artists from getting started, let alone getting creative. “Focusing the creative energy on a narrower field of exploration allows for a more in-depth processing of fewer alternatives.”<sup>74</sup> When compared with spoken languages, music even has its advantages. “*Green Eggs And Ham*” is not too popular outside the English speaking world, as it doesn’t translate well, being knitted together using only 50 cleverly rhymed English words. Music has the ability to surpass such translation barriers.

Top hit profiles in commercial charts indicate that popular music has long since discovered the power of simplified structures, and “popular song has established a set of musical and literary constraints within which creativity operates.”<sup>75</sup> Still, even in classical music, which often is the very first image in people’s mind when thinking about musical creativity<sup>76</sup>, the positive effects of creative constraints can be recognized. One of classical music’s greatest icons Igor Stravinsky has declared his firm opinion on the matter. Unlike Johnson-Laird<sup>77</sup>, Stravinsky did not feel the need to back his arguments computationally. He claimed that for him it was difficult, even impossible to create completely without restrictions. If there were none, he would construct them for himself. Artistic freedom according to him was vastly overrated. Unrestricted freedom would throw him into anguish, from which he could only break away by resorting to something concrete and finite. “Which of us has ever heard talk of art as other than a realm of freedom? This sort of heresy is uniformly widespread because it is imagined that art is outside the bounds of ordinary activity. Well, in art as in everything else, one can build only

---

73 Haught-Tromp 2017, 1.

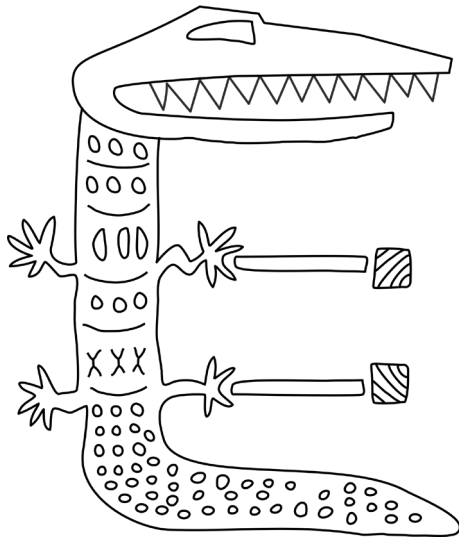
74 Haught-Tromp 2017, 2.

75 Bennett 2012, 139.

76 Burnard 2012, 7.

77 Johnson-Laird 1988, 209-218.

upon a resisting foundation: whatever constantly gives way to pressure, constantly renders movement impossible."<sup>78</sup> Conceiving of constraints from a completely opposite angle than most of us, Stravinsky went as far as to proclaim them a liberating and empowering factor in the creative process. "Whatever diminishes constraint, diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit."<sup>79</sup>



ven without tonal restrictions posing a threat to creativity, the entire issue of diatonic constraints could be avoided by constructing those two-layer chromatic balafon versions earlier presented in this thesis. However, modifying balafon to stretch into chromatic repertoire forces such changes to its basic structure and playing technique, that we should consider viewing it as a separate subcategory. Pitch is one thing, and for pleasurable musical interaction to take place

in a setup, it should be the same or at least bearably close. But tuning and typical melody lines form a significant part of an instrument's character and personality. It is not all about what it sounds like, it is also what it does. We risk losing too many unique identifying factors if all instruments are forced to behave similarly and perform similar melodies.

The issue brings us back to the theme of diversity. Traditional instruments have undergone modifications in their past, and current ethnomusicological theories<sup>80</sup> suggest that they should continue adapting as long as it supports their sustainability. In Mandinka mentality innovations have never been frowned upon. General positivity toward natural evolutionary process has already been discussed in the section "Research approach", where I described storytelling sessions in which jalis were expected to enhance oral history stories with their own creative

<sup>78</sup> Stravinsky 1947, 64-65.

<sup>79</sup> Stravinsky 1947, 64-65.

<sup>80</sup> Grant 2012, 38.

input. Still, when an instrument's structural changes are this significant, they produce new subdivisions with future prospects of their own.

Listing examples of constraints which may boost creativity is easier than altering musicians' initial reactions. Instead of tonal limitations being considered a frustrating hindrance, they could, in theory, be seen as interesting, empowering support to lean onto. The very word "limit" has a negative charge, whereas "channeling" would imply direction, efficiency, focus and ambitious movement towards results. If those working in the field of music could open to new perspective that would see previous limitations transformed to creative potential, it might prove beneficial to both their personal creative energy and overall musical diversity.

This inquiry uses Mandinka balafon as an example, yet similar principles apply for other ethnic instruments that do not fully surrender to the dictates of Western music. With these observations and thoughts, my hope is to trigger positivity and appreciation for such 'misbehavers', so that more often, musicians would embrace their anomalies as tools for channeling creative resources. Conventions like the 12-step A440 chromatic tuning are often taken as self-evident to such an extent that flexibility to work outside its structure has been reduced. For anyone thoroughly accustomed to working under conventional conditions, it may take time to embrace perceived unconventional constraints as channels of creativity, but here, let me join voices with Sam-Am-I: "You do not like them. So you say. Try them! Try them! And you may. Try them and you may, I say."<sup>81</sup>

---

81 Dr. Seuss / Geisel 1960.

This narrative inquiry has explored the past and present of the Mandinka balafon and followed its attempt to establish a firm foothold in the metamorphosing field of world music. It has cast thoughts on the issue of musical sustainability in the midst of globalization, and touched on the miscellaneous field of creativity from the point of view of a traditional instrument straining to overcome obstacles and adapt to an unprecedented set of rules laid out by Western musical conventions.

As a researcher and performing musician, this project has generated in me an increasing awareness of all that has not yet been shared about my beloved balafon, and a hunger to fill at least some of the gaps both musically and via written words. Balafon has more to tell, its history blending mysticism and facts into an intriguing cocktail, and its current tidings stretching well beyond the traditional borderlines.

As a point of clarification, while the narrator in Sosso- Bala's chapter claims the opposite, the first ever constructed balafon was most likely not handed over from the magical world of spirits. The exact course of events is lost in time, but ethnomusicologists pinpoint balafon's most probable geographical origin in the Indonesian archipelago, where it crossed the Indian Ocean to land in East Africa. Some suggest the movement to have taken place the other way round, from Africa to Indonesia, but this is less likely. Similarities with the Indonesian gamelan's construction and tuning support the presumption of the two being related.<sup>82</sup> Still, historical accuracy is not the reason why UNESCO listed the cultural space of Sosso-Bala among the Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage<sup>83</sup>, so maintaining a whiff of mysticism in balafon's birth story seemed justifiable, perhaps even advisable.

---

<sup>82</sup> Jessup 1983, 2.

<sup>83</sup> UNESCO 2019.

In its current scope and content this inquiry may serve as an igniter of interest. If there were to be continuation or completion of its narrations, Niagassola near Malien border of Guinea would be an excellent place to start. In fact, at first, it appeared this research would take course in that very direction. In January 2018, while staying in the house of Jali Alagi Mbye in Gambia, I revealed to the famed kora jali my dream of one day traveling to Sosso-Bala's premises to sit down and converse with its guardian family, the Dökala Kouyates. To my delight Mbye, such an enthusiastic and devoted oral historian himself, got extremely excited about the idea. Wasting no time we drafted preliminary plans for the following winter. I was overjoyed: with Mbye's contact network and social status opening us doors and loosening tongues we would undoubtedly hear some incredible stories.

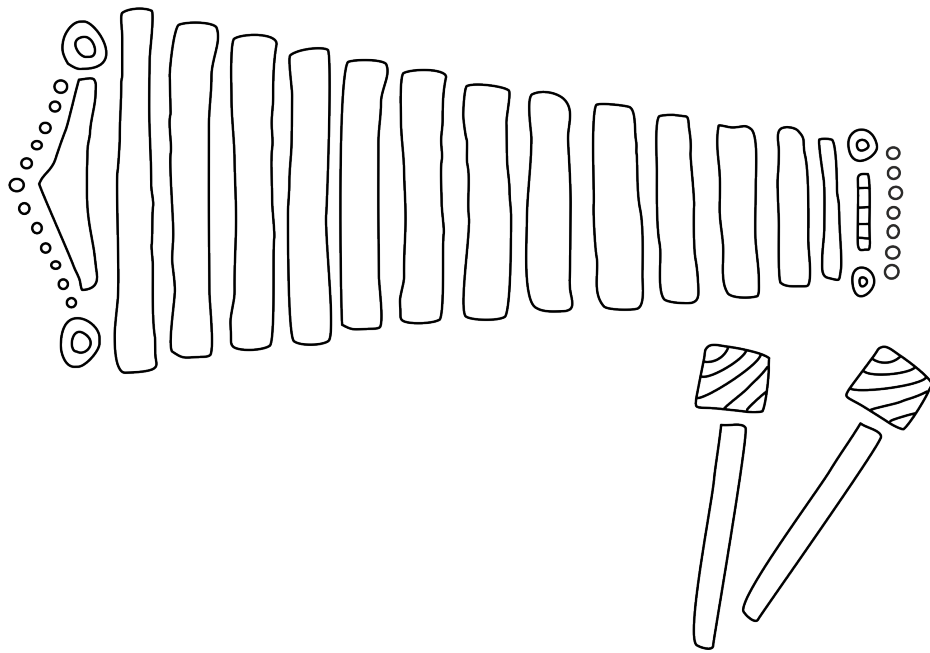
Sadly the Mandinka community lost one of its most treasured jali libraries, as Alagi Mbye passed suddenly away in December 2018, the shock of which put my field trip plans on hold until further notice.

Concerning the key terms of musical sustainability and creativity, sharing these ancient stories and exploring their modern continuation is important for strengthening Mandinka balafon's evolving identity. Awareness of and pride over its enchanting storyline may support the genre's sustainability in today's musical melting pot of cultural influences. Firmly established identity will also serve as a sturdy base for innovative experiments, offering empowering channels for creativity without having to completely surrender to the homogenizing standards of Western music making, which poses a risk of losing touch to balafon's unique identifying features. For while the global phenomenon of 21st century's music is thriving with a vast array of genres, styles and traditions flourishing like never before, in its wake lie too many marginal subgenres and practices like the art of Mandinka balafon, struggling to maintain their vitality. I would like to believe that our human need for making individualistic choices from among mass attractions will help those gasping for breath stay afloat.

A line has now been drawn from Mandinka balafon's yesterday into today. Hopefully it will meander on until tomorrow, outlining a profile worthy of the instrument's fascinating past.

Touch wood.

---



- Astley, Thomas. 1745: "A New General Collection of Voyages and Travels". Reprint 1968, ed. Frank Cass.
- Baumann, Max Peter, 2000: "The Local and the Global: Traditional Musical Instruments and Modernization". *The World of Music*, vol.42 no.3 p.121-144.
- Béchet, Eugène. 1889: "Cinq Ans De Séjour Au Soudan Français". E. Plon.
- Bennett, Joe, 2012: "Constraint, Collaboration and Creativity in Popular Songwriting Teams". *The act of musical composition: Studies in the creative process*, p.139-169.
- Broughton, Simon, 2016: "The Balafon". *Songlines*, no.123 p.38-41.
- Burnard, Pamela. 2012: "Musical Creativities in Practice". Oxford University Press.
- Camara, Jali Alsegny "Mayeli" (1960-). Oral Interviews. Personal communication with Maarika Autio in 1997-2002.
- Charry, Eric. 2000: "Mande Music: Traditional and Modern Music of the Maninka and Mandinka of Western Africa". University of Chicago Press.
- Cissokho, Jali Solo (1963-2019). Oral Interviews. Personal communication with Maarika Autio in 2004-2017.
- Connelly, F. M., and D. J. Clandinin, 1990: "Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry". *Educational Researcher*, vol.19 no.5 p.2-14.
- Conrad, David C., and Barbara E. Frank. 1995: "Status and Identity in West Africa: Nyamakalaw of Mande". Indiana University Press.
- Counsel, Graeme, 2004: "Popular Music and Politics in Sékou Touré's Guinea". p.28-29.
- Diabate, Jali Lassana (1962-). Oral Interviews. Personal communication with Maarika Autio in 2007-2010.
- Dr. Seuss / Geisel Theodor. 1960: "Green Eggs and Ham". New York: Random House.
- Dumenu, W. K., and W. N. Bandoh, 2016: "Exploitation of African Rosewood (*Pterocarpus Erinaceus*) in Ghana: A Situation Analysis". *Ghana J.Forestry*, vol.32 p.1-15.

Encyclopædia Britannica. "Senegal." in Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. [database online]. Feb 27, [cited 2020]. Available from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Senegal>.

Encyclopædia Britannica. "Sumanguru." Jan 28, [cited 2019]. Available from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sumanguru>.

Furniss, Graham, and Liz Gunner. 2008: "Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature". Cambridge University Press.

Grant, Catherine, 2012: "Rethinking Safeguarding: Objections and Responses to Protecting and Promoting Endangered Musical Heritage". *Ethnomusicology Forum*, vol.21 no.1 p.31-51.

Haught-Tromp, Catrinel, 2017: "The Green Eggs and Ham Hypothesis: How Constraints Facilitate Creativity". *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, vol.11 no.1 .

Hoffman, Barbara G. 2000: "Griots at War : Conflict, Conciliation, and Caste in Mande". Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Howard Gardner, 2013: "Igor Stravinsky: The Poetics and Politics of Music". *Avant: Journal of Philosophical-Interdisciplinary Vanguard*, vol.IV no.3/2013 p.199-241.

Jessup, Lynne. 1983: "The Mandinka Balafon : An Introduction with Notation for Teaching". United States: Xylo Publications.

Johnson-Laird, Philip N., 1988: "Freedom and Constraint in Creativity". *The nature of creativity: Contemporary psychological perspectives*, vol.202.

Kouyate, Vieux Oral Interviews: Ndèpu Dof. Personal communication with Maarika Autio in 2007-2008.

Mbye, Jali Alagi (1965-2018). Oral Interviews. Personal communication with Maarika Autio in 2017-2018.

McPherson, Laura, 2019: "The Talking Balafon of the Sambla: Grammatical Principles and Documentary Implications". *Anthropological Linguistics*, vol.60 no.3 p.255-294.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary. "Primitive." [cited 2020]. Available from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/primitive>.

Miller, Terry E., and Andrew Shahriari. 2016: "World Music: A Global Journey". 4.th ed. Taylor & Francis.

Nettl, Bruno. 1985: "The Western Impact on World Music : Change, Adaptation, and Survival". New York: Schirmer.

Paterno, Domenica R., 1994: "The True Lion King of Africa: The Epic History of Sundiata, King of Old Mali."

Pease, Donald. 2010: "Theodor SEUSS Geisel". Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA.

Polkinghorne, Donald E., 1995: "Narrative Configuration in Qualitative Analysis". *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol.8 no.1 p.5-23.

Schippers, Huib, and Catherine Grant. 2016: "Sustainable Futures for Music



Cultures: An Ecological Perspective". Oxford University Press.

Simpson, Andrew. 2008: "Language and National Identity in Africa". Oxford University Press.

Stillman, Amy Ku'uleialoha, 1999: "Globalizing Hula". Yearbook for Traditional Music, vol.31 p.57-66.

Stravinsky, Igor. 1947: "Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons". Harvard University Press.

Sylla, Jali Mory Oral Interviews. Personal communication with Maarika Autio 2017-2018.

Titon, Jeff Todd. 2019: "Sustainability, Resilience, and Adaptive Management for Applied Ethnomusicology". Oxford University Press.

UNESCO. Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. "Cultural Space of Sosso-Bala." [cited 2019]. Available from <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/cultural-space-of-sosso-bala-00009>.

White, Bob W. etc. 2011: "Music and Globalization : Critical Encounters". Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Williams, Joe Luther, Jr. 2006: "Transmitting the Balafon in Mande Culture: Performing Africa at Home and Abroad." Ph.D. diss., ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Zemp, Hugo, and Sikaman Soro, 2010: "Talking Balafons". African Music: Journal of the International Library of African Music, vol.8 no.4 p.6-23.